# THE THINKING MAN'S SCHENKER

SCENE: Our capital's glorious, raz-ama-dazzling West End. Twenty-five feet across a spacious apartment in Chrysalis' head office, the other side of a lengthy oak conference table, a silent television screen rebounds a stare. Botham and Willis and mutely lulling willow-wielding men-in-white from Down Under into elementary botches.

The room is a lofty enormity, but assumes a modern air grasped by its apparent boardroom status. In one corner is set a C-plan of blue leather settees. There is a large coffee table in the centre of these, on which rest: a wilting pot veg, yesterday's *Daily Mirror,* six tepid tins of lager, two of coke, one bottle Courvoisier cognac, a used cup 'n' saucer and an ashtray. Still following? Good.

The journalist reclines against a plush arm rest and considers: pleasant, tranquil, cool, rarely interrupted, unhurried — the ideal interview scenario? — Almost. Michael Schenker sits opposite. . .

DOESN'T time fly! It's a year now since Makowski's feature headline joyously proclaimed that 'Michael Schenker is a changed man'.

Not tremendously much has happened for MSG in that year, at least on the face of it: A short Armed And Ready US Tour playing second fiddle to Molly Hatchet and above the Johnny Van Zandt Band (southern fried boogie, a grevous mismatch), Pink Pop and Hamburg Rockpalast in Europe, five months recording in the studio, and a super-successful Land Of The Rising Sun excursion.

Nevertheless, that title could apply with equal truth to '81 — psychological affections can change too, or maybe intensify, you'll see.

Herr Schenker's English is timidly soft-spoken, fringed by an accent more expected from a resident Scandinavian and tinged with habitual London leanings (dropped t's) believe it or not. Language obviously lacks some coherency — "Remember you're talking to a kid" he advised after an ice-breaking chat about a once-shared locality.' An uncharacteristically bright kid.

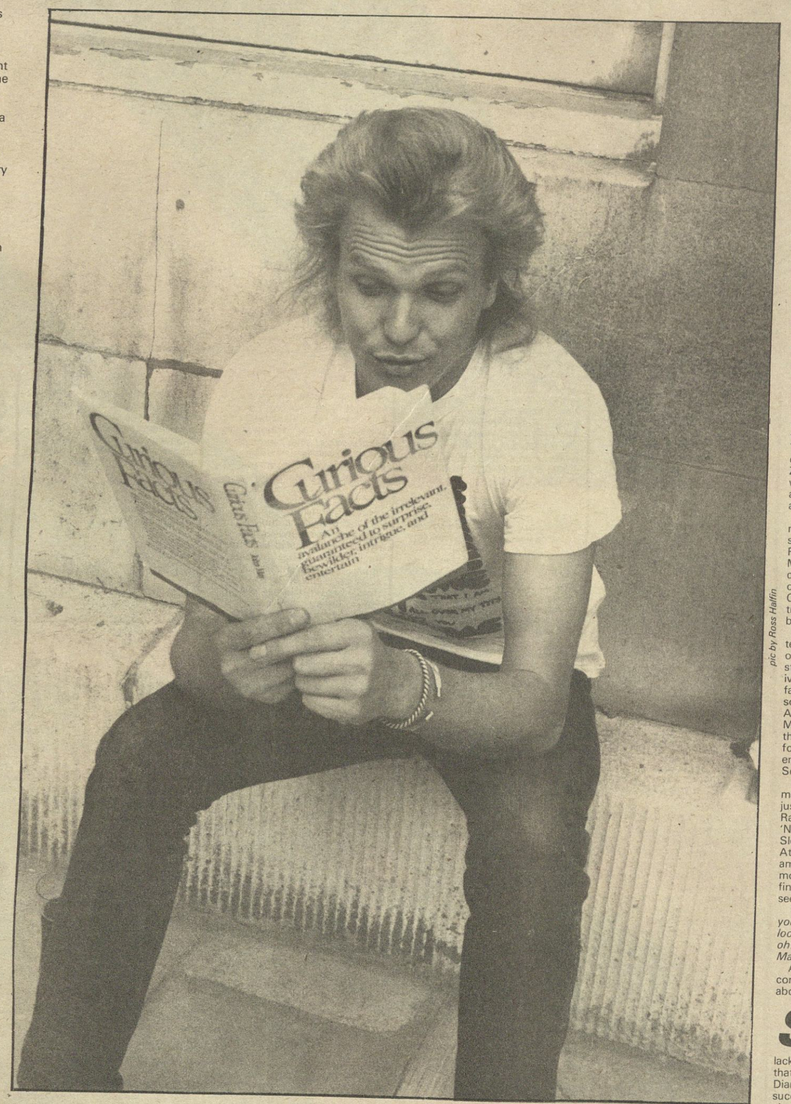
It doesn't take a psychiatrist to analyse what the blond bombshell's about (though conclusions might be of some interest), that there's more to him than the universally lauded, superlative mastery of the fretboard for which his name is held in honoured reverence.

This guy's got heart, really, heart sufficient to keep Christian Barnard's incising scalpel at it for weeks. Emotional views on certain subjects were plainly a-plenty and bubbling just under the surface during our extensive five hour 'tete-a-tete (thirty to sixty minutes is a regular length). The key word, remember readers, is *feel.* . .

"I don't like to look back. It doesn't make any sense. It's difficult to explain". A recurring phrase, not only resulting from the language barrier, but also due to an awareness that millions — well, nearly — would read this.

"Not because of what I've been through. The past, it like doesn't exist any more, it's finished."

Great, fine. No question, we've worn our eyeballs out reading about the shrouded, erratic history of this man; UFO syndrome, short-lived Scorpions stint, finally going mysteriously AWOL from rehearsals with Billy Sheenan and Denny Carmassi, Montrose refugees.




pic by Ross Halfin.

## Or if you prefer: The Schenking Man's Thinker. A Carl Sagan-style philosophical voyage by Prof. PHILIP BELL

And the vindictive, vicious, abundant *rumours.* So references here are honed to a bare minimum. Besides, I assure you he's a verbal cornucopia, full of things to say.

I did, however, inquire about mental stress, how he'd coped with the pressure encountered recording 'MSG', the second 'solo' effort. And surprisingly enough, in a forward Germanic manner, though still 'err'-ing and using del–aying words to allow a thinking margin, he explained:

"OK. Going to alcohol. I had a plan. I used to say I didn't plan, but everyone plans more or less, a week in hand or more. I went into the studio straight, and after two weeks we had problems with the producer" — Ron Nevison of 'Lights Out', 'Obsession' and 'Strangers' fame.

"Everything took *so* long and after a while it was getting too crazy, I was like sitting and watching TV and getting *really bored.*

"It's almost impossible to explain what happened, I tell you. He was making me so nervous, 'cos I like to work fast, he is so slow. You don't see any progress and after all those months continuously being in the studio, I just couldn't handle it any more, but I had to be there.

"And so much bullshit was going on between the producer and us and the deadline was months ago. So everything in my plan, like a holiday, didn't work out — we ended up recording *and* rehearsing for Japan.

"There *is* an awful lot of pressure involved. So like, the only way was having a 'few' drinks. I hate myself for that, honestly. It was just to be calm. Not only me. For an example, a tape operator never smoked, and after a fortnight he started forty a day. It did affect everybody."

I feel like a priest at Confession.

IT SOON transpires that a body of opinion had lobbied for self-production, but was outvoted.

"I said it's a new group, let's have Nevison because he has a little more experience, and it was agreed."

A disenchanting error. But did the charismatic Kraut consider progress to have been made compared to the debut? Or is it entirely new, incomparable ground?

"It could be both. I think it's more powerful because of Chris (Glen) and Cozy (Powell, dimwits). No bullshit, I personally think for this type of music it's one of the best rhythm sections in the world. All I can say, many, many, many months ago, when we started rehearsing it was all there. I lost the frame of mind, it became like . . . like jogging from here to Hanover.

"I'm not disappointed with the album but it could have taken half the time. Somebody had to shut up. Nevison or me, so I prefer to and let him decide more than I would have liked to. I'd say he screwed us up."

Would he be twiddling MSG's knobs again?

"No. He's a great producer but if I have to enter Air Studios I get a kind of yeeuucch. A big NO — only because he loves himself more than anybody else."

One of Cozy Powell's drum tracks was allegedly neglected from inclusion on initial tapes. There's even heresay of the event during the recording of Zep's 'Physical Graffiti' platter when Mr Ron deemed it appropriate to completely wipe a Page solo. . .

Steven Stills and a mysterious 'someone else' *do* squeak backing on Paul Raymond's contribution, but McCartney *does not* make a cameo appearance. He *did* jam on a version of one track when Chris Glen was delayed by traffic, but it never went beyond that stage.

The 'dynamics', as Micky terms them, of this year's offering are doubtless its strongest plus: Raymond's ivory-tinkling has shoved fathoms on the depth of the sound — prick an ear to 'On And On' or the epic 'I Want More' for positive proof — and the atmospheric stop-go effect for which the keyboards are employed complements Schenker's work beautifully.

As for the meticulous maestro of plectrum-art himself, just listen to the lead breaks on Raymond's otherwise flimsy 'Never Trust A Stranger' or 'Let Sleeping Dogs Lie' or 'The Attack Of The Mad Axeman,' among the most mind-blowing movements of combustible finger-lickin' his digits have ever seen set to plastic.

*'Time after time in the wings you can see him/He's only looking for fun in his dreams oh/ Watch The Attack Of The Mad Axeman!'*

And yes, Gary Barden confirms 'it might well be' about you-no-ooo.

STILL, I refrain from screaming that MSG have cleaned up proper. Something's lacking in there. Ever strike you that bands like Chevy and Diamond Head (aye, natural successors was a tongue-in-cheek remark editorially blown out of proportion) are churning out more compulsive chord progressions (riffs to you squire) and wasn't 'Armed And Ready' sufficient for the 'Are You Ready To Rock' gender?'

Does Michael feel that his reputation as one of the world's foremost (ahem) 'axe heroes' ever stunts his composing possibilities?

"I don't like to talk about myself in that sense. I get a lot of compliments from other people, actually, telling me I am what you asked about".

The suggestion embarrasses him.

"I don't really realise, I dunno, it never affects me. Whenever I write I am crying out, I write what I feel. It must be the guitar makes people say 'axe hero'."

The guitar — talking of which: "I was playing a Les Paul when I was sixteen and I broke a string so Rudy (if you don't know by now. . .) had to give me his Flying 'V'. So I was playing it and the *sound* it made was so good and I said to him 'I'm not going to give it back you know. I'll give you money. I have to have this guitar.' And that's the same one I'm playing today."

Yep, that of the famous jester colour scheme — originally a stage gear concept, scotched after the punk explosion when you could pick up such garments in "any Marks and Spencers store". The very same legendary model in that equally legendary poster, and the very same model that fell victim to the ultimate 'attack of the mad axeman' two years back.

"Every time I smash it up it gets better" professes its owner. Since then it has been painstakingly re-assembled — from its 'thousand pieces' — scrutinisation reveals crack traces in its bodywork — and is still distinguishable by its dot fret-indicators, as the otherwise identical spares are oblong (top marks for observation eh chapsl).

Playing for Michael still rates A1 priority, "more so than ever before" and especially on tour. "I wanna play, I wanna feel good. I can tell you it's about 80 times more fun, the new songs on stage, they're about 80 times better than the record cos it comes from our heart more.

"And when I take lead break, I'm in a trance, there is nothing around me, then when I stop the audience come back, smiling. It would be difficult to answer a question like, Do you know what note you play next, there is no way. It just comes out. I think of the question often, but it's just so natural. I don't concentrate when I play lead, or take it too seriously, but it's very important to me. I like the people I'm playing with at present, no personal clashes, it's fun."

Only one of the reasons for Micky's periodical stressing that "it's a group" and that he speaks only for himself. The 'MSG' logo on the new album cover is this year eminently prominent over the words 'Michael Schenker Group,' and to his imagination "the initials could stand for anything."

"They kept asking me in Japan if it's true Cozy's going to leave. I said to them, tell you what, why don't you go to the next room in the hotel and ask Cozy, and they went like ohohhh, nononono. I said OK. I went over to the door and said Cozy, people keep saying to me a quesiton, is it true you're going to leave, *yes or no.* NO! (impersonates booming Powell retortion). And that was their answer. *It is a group.*"

BUT WAIT a minute. I sense unrest. What was that crap about 'emotional views' and 'feel' at the start? Is this Bell nutty? I hear you ask. Not quite. Our conversation undergoes a sudden inexplicable change of direction, spurred by a question as to whether or not the interviewee was academically inclined. *Read on for a shocko exclusive — Michael Schenker's mind exposed!*

"I only read five books in my adult life, because they all said the same thing in different ways. They were all about philosophy, I'm very much into that, attitude of life."

*Into it to what extent?*

"I'm not really that much interested to be famous or a star having a lot of money. All I want after seventeen years of sticking to one thing is a bit of money to find a place where I can have peace. Apart from that rock and roll can last forever for me.

"But my main thing is, parallel to that, which wouldn't drive me crazy, is I have a feel to find out why I live. I know in my opinion it's an evolution. It has always been a question for myself because unless I know or could feel there is an answer, I would feel lost on this planet and things would drive me crazy."

*How do you mean why we live? Is God involved?*

"Why am I here? What is the purpose? Well for instance, what is 'God?' OK, you're young, your parents tell you God is a person with big eyes, he can see everything at one time, all bad things, yeah. It's just a symbol for kids.

"All the different religions started off somewhere separate, but they all meet, they go to the fact there is *something* . . . call it happiness or being able to get rid of your ego, I think 'God' exists in each individual person. So when I was younger and playing, and people having this banner 'Schenker is God,' I hated that fact, I was very shocked. But after years I said well, that's stupid because if they feel like saying that, it makes them happy, then it's OK. I could say the same to the audience." (The audience is God?)

*How can we find happiness in ourselves then?*

"By learning. I believe you can be Jesus Christ *(author's note — the church ain't gonna like this),* by having the attitude, instead of saying you are wrong saying *I* am wrong, being able to correct yourself instead of other people. I believe in simple instead of complicated.

"I have so much respect for any religion. If you believe in Karma you believe in reincarnation and carrying on until you find out why you live. I believe in that, but I would never force anyone to agree."

"Anyway, it's getting a bit too deep, ask me something more . . . human."

*Did Lennon's murder shock you?*

"I hate violence." (Earlier he had declined a forceful Halfin request for him to pose with an axe). "When I heard Lennon was *actually dead,* I was obviously shocked, because I like the Beatles very much when I was young. I think I was trying to analyse *why* people would do that more than that he is dead. I don't think about dying too much."

*Do you still consider yourself an extreme person, in daily habits etc.?*

"At the moment I'm living more or less a normal (?) life. I was too extreme from sixteen to twenty-four. I was vegetarian. I was like getting up four times a day to meditate for an hour, I was expecting too much too soon. I was believing in it so much I was overdoing it. My father gave me a little book, so easy to read (Herman Hessler's 'Batatra'). I got an answer out of that, it taught me to come down a bit. I'm still extreme, but not like I used to be."

"Snigger, snigger." I can hear you. "It's Schenker, he's a crank." "They always said he was mad." Small-minded morons. I think it's pure human sense (sensitivity?), epitomised by comments such as "Peter Way is a very sweet person." Michael Schenker's brain functions. And now. . .

Back to the music. MSG Live.

LEAP ONE week. Scene: Newcastle City Hall, the third date of the sellout 'On The Rack' tour (a saying dating from UFO days: 'Who's on the rack today?' — who's going in for the Nevison production treatment.)

Big gig buzz has swept an atmospheric sense of occasion over the auditorium and make no mistake, they're gonna damn well enjoy themselves. Such an audience thrive on excitement, and an abundance of that comes with this band.

"Are you high tonight" is the 'Armed And Ready' battle-cry — high on MSG — is it illegal — uh-uh; it's good for you. Get high on the superb saarbirrine axe — 'Attack Of The Mad Schenker — Man,' Or the Floyd-ish organ-guitar mixture, spinning in delay-then shrewdly sliding with fore-chord fissure into 'Lost Horizons.'

Marvel at virtuoso musicianly precision — Paul Raymond nipping from key-banks to back-up rhythm role and not losing a semi-quaver, Chris Glen's dependable four-string melodies, and Cozy Powell, ah yes, nosey Cozy — Hail the return of the drum solo pt 2. The future of his '633 Squadron' bashalong (wailing sirens, search beams and authentic cataclysmic explosions inclusive of course) was exceeded in rapturous reception only by the encore call following 'Doctor Doctor'.

"It's been a long time Newcastle, how are ya?" A frontman crowd fave with a bullet, never mind that comment — Gary Barden confidently laps up the 'feel' and doubly repays it with his voice. And there, flanking to his left, Schenker, bouncing with a new-found frivolity, taunting the outstretched peace signs with the tip of his wooden arrow, and unleashing scorching runs, befuddling onlooking admirers.

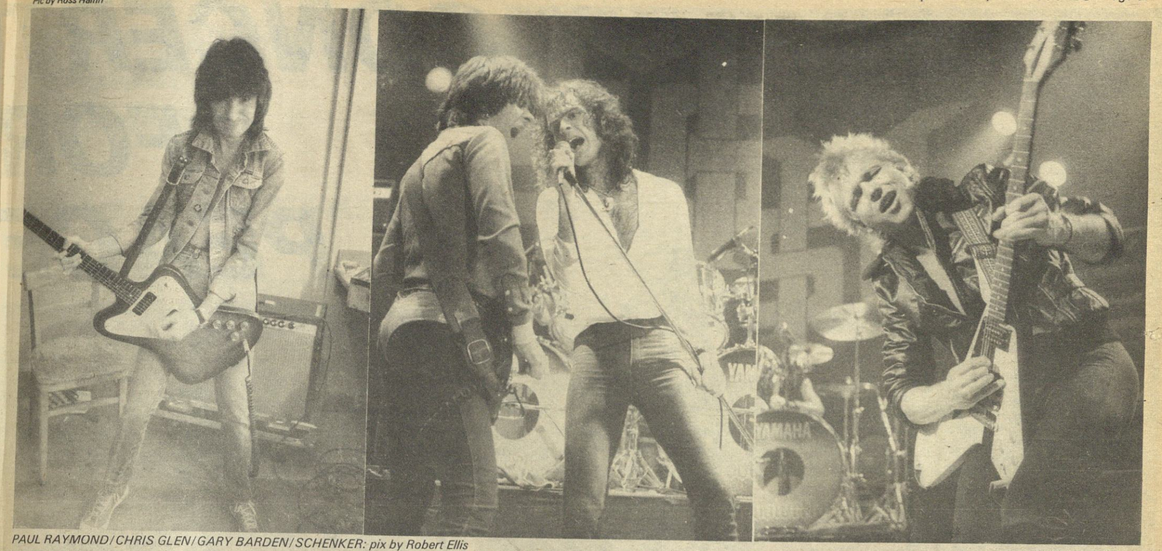
It's all part of the choice repertoire, split between the two albums with said blast from the past thrown in — but one tiny qualm: After a party-down come-back turn of 'Ready To Rock,' I could still hear 'em. 'Rock Bottom', they appealed expectantly. No such luck. I *know* it's old, I *know* it's long . . . but it's like Ozzy without the peace signs. . .

Schenker's adamant. "Did you hear the 'Auf Wiedersehen' tape" he beams. "It's so dreadful it gets them out straight away."

I love a happy ending. MSG, his girlfriend, life; Michael Schenker *is* a happy man.

**DON'T MISS THE FREE SCHENKER FLEXIDISC ON THE COVER OF NEXT WEEK'S SOUNDS!**

Pic by Ross Halfin



PAUL RAYMOND/CHRIS GLEN/GARY BARDEN/SCHENKER: pix by Robert Ellis